

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church  
on December 10, 2023.**

**LANDSCAPE**

*<Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Mark 1:1-8>*

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, our Rock and Redeemer, our Peace. Amen.

Perhaps you've heard this story before. Perhaps it's time to hear it again.

In late 1914, across Europe from the English Channel to the Swiss Alps, the landscape was changing. Trenches appeared as soldiers of opposing armies dug in to what would become a deadly stalemate. What was once a pastoral landscape was now criss-crossed with 8 foot deep trenches; green, grassy slopes were turned into quagmires of mud and stagnant puddles. Trees were removed, either by hand to be used in the trenches or by the bombardment of artillery fire. And barbed wire became the defining feature.

While the trenches, and the "No-Mans Land" which ran between them, were relatively flat and featureless, the tenor - the feel - of the landscape became rough and inhospitable. Pockmarked. Angry, even. Travel was done through zigzags and indirect routes. The footpaths were uneven, and conditions led to trench foot and other health issues. Though the image of these fields is one of barrenness and a lack of features, the feel of the place was one of jagged, insurmountable, unapproachable terrain. Uninviting. Inaccessible.

Such was the reality as the months of fall 1914 made way for the early months of winter, and into December.

The People of God, living in the exilic and warring times of the prophet Isaiah, would understand these feelings. The actual state of being could likely be detailed in any number of shifting situations, but the feel would have been one very similar to 1914 Europe - tense, inhospitable, inaccessible.

Likewise the People of God, living in expectant waiting and increasing anxiety under the rule of the Roman Empire, would understand these feelings. Every day was tense, waiting to see if a new decree, a new law, a new interpretation would be handed down from caesar, or from the governor, through the soldiers. Every day was an expectant hope that the Messiah, the deliverer would come and all would be made right. The only peace was the desire for peace, and the attempt to stay out of sight of those who were in power.

We, today, can still understand, and we continue to bear the desire of peace, the expectant waiting, the yearning toward what is to come. All around us we recognize

places in which the world, our world, is uneven and unjust. Places where violence, anger, hatred, and warfare rule the day. And in such a view, the landscape is indeed uneven, inaccessible, and foreboding.

It should not be seen as any coincidence that John was baptizing and preaching out at the Jordan River. Nor should it surprise us, as readers, that Mark begins his gospel, nearly verbatim, with the same words that begin the story of Genesis.

John is beginning a new thing, a new proclamation of “the One who is to come,” the arrival of the Messiah, the Redeemer. It is this One, John will preach, who brings fulfillment to the world, to every aspect of humanity and creation, who will baptize with the Spirit and make right all that is wayward. It is this One who will bring the realization of hope, and will truly make new all that is, or perhaps, rather, make right all that is. As a prophet, John’s message is basic: to prepare the way is an invitation to turn from one way of being and join in on the way that expresses God’s will.

So it is no coincidence that John is at the Jordan River. There are other, perhaps even better places John could have picked. Locations more verdant and lush with greenery and life. But John went to the wilderness, and specifically, to the place where the People of God crossed over into the land after their own desert wanderings, post-Egyptian slavery. The people became, more fully, the People of God when they crossed the Jordan, there in the wilderness. God had been with them in the wilderness, guiding and providing, and as they crossed the Jordan their new lives, their new identity truly took root. It makes sense that John is likewise out in the wilderness, preaching God’s presence and the Messiah’s coming in the landscape where God had been known. It makes sense that John is inviting people - from all of Jerusalem and the Judean countryside - into new life in the same place where the people had historically become bearers of new life.

And it makes sense that Mark, as he begins the gospel story, the earliest recorded story of the good news, uses words from the beginning of creation and recorded history.

We tend to think that Advent is the start of a new thing. In truth, it is the start of a renewed thing. A renewed vision. A renewed promise. A renewed hope. The making straight and level, once more, of the landscape that leads to God. Making it accessible. And with all this remaking, peace.

Not the transient peace of humanity, wherein we might pause our violence for a few days or a few hours, but peace which is sustained, and which is sustaining. It is the reworking of the landscape to bring about connection, to foster relationship, to showcase empathy and humanity.

After years of exile and aggression from neighboring countries, Isaiah is finally able to preach a good word, a word of hope and peace. “Comfort, O comfort my people , says your God.” The repetition of comfort emphasizes and stresses its application and realization.

In the midst of the trenches in 1914, with the Germans on one side and the British forces on the other, an unexpected thing happened. In the late hours of Christmas Eve, British soldiers heard singing from the German side of No-Mans Land. Carols. Songs of good news of great joy. The British began to sing along, words in their own language which matched the music of the tune. And in that connection, in that moment of song and proclamation in the Christmas season, peace was known. The landscape of No-Mans Land was transformed. Though it was still barren, still muddy and pockmarked with artillery fire. Though it was still uneven, nonetheless it was transformed.

As soldiers on both sides put down their weapons and instead met in the middle, No-Mans Land was transformed into the very vision which Isaiah proclaimed, which John echoed - mountains were leveled and valleys lifted up; crooked paths were made straight. So that each person might approach one another, and together they might approach God.

The truce, sadly, was short-lived. Such is the human condition. But the peace that it represents, the promise of the good news of the Kingdom to come...that is ever-lasting. By joining in song, by meeting one another as brothers long separated in order to celebrate the fulfilling of the promise of the prophets...in this the Kingdom of God came to be, just a little bit more.

We should note that the words of Isaiah - prepare, straighten, raise up - are considered Divine Passives. They are things that God is doing; we are merely invited to help. And our help will be minimal, and imperfect. Like a toddler helping to make cookies, or clean up after making cookies, it could be said that very little is actually contributed. But that is not true. God is doing the work, and our contribution can make all the difference in changing the landscape.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, the landscape is indeed about to change. Behold, there is construction ahead. May we join God in this work. Amen.